

(Washington, DC) Congressman Alcee L. Hastings (D-Miramar) made the following statement in recognition of the 9th anniversary of 9/11:

“Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of the September 11 attacks was the way our country responded with fervent unity. A day of unimaginable horror was met with levels of solidarity experienced only a few times in American history. President Bush’s approval rating soared overnight, sales of American flags sky-rocketed, and the country coalesced around an adopted national motto: “United We Stand.” As President Bush addressed the country at a national prayer service only four days after the attacks, he invoked FDR, reminding the nation that, “today we feel the warm courage of national unity.

“The national unity that was so visible in the days after the attacks, however, has faded. As America marks the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the national mood surrounding the memory of September 11 seems more acrimonious than in previous years. Americans stand divided over precisely who – or what – was responsible for 9/11: was it al Qaeda or Islam?

“This fundamental question driving the bitterness that defines the latest anniversary of 9/11 is evident in nearly every corner of America. From the debates over the proposed Islamic cultural centers in Lower Manhattan and Murfreesboro, Tennessee, to misinformed cable news and radio personalities streaming into living rooms across America, Americans increasingly identify Islam, not al Qaeda, as 9/11’s primary culprit.

“The rancor amplifying the debate over the proposed Islamic cultural centers, however, is a symptom of America’s disunity regarding the memory of September 11 rather than its cause. On the ninth anniversary of 9/11, the country’s division is motivated by an anxiety over a lack of tangible progress in our two-front mission to punish those who attacked us. Americans can see signs of progress in Iraq and, more fleetingly, in Afghanistan, but we cannot feel them.

“Prior to 9/11, radical Islam was an afterthought for most Americans. Even after the United States weathered the al Qaeda-directed attacks on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the bombing of the USS Cole, Americans remained largely inattentive to this looming threat. Now that radical Islam is a front-burner issue for the majority of the country, Americans are increasingly fearful of an unseen, yet seemingly omnipresent enemy that lurks in the netherworld of Afghanistan’s mountainous border shared with Pakistan’s lawless tribal regions.

"Adding to our collective anxiety is the expansion of our enemy's composition. In the days after 9/11, newspapers across the country ran headlines attributing the attacks to al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. Nine years on, with al Qaeda reportedly marginalized, newspapers and cable news outlets are filled with headlines detailing indiscriminate suicide bombings and improvised explosive attacks from an unidentifiable perpetrator. Was it the Taliban? Al Qaeda? Lashkar-e-Tayyiba? It seems that the number of terrorist groups America must contain has only increased since our invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

"After America responded to 9/11 by invading Afghanistan in 2001, it entered the region from which a majority of radical Islamic terror emanated, and our view of the enemy devolved. As more terrorist groups reared their ugly heads – even after our military assured us that al Qaeda was "on the run" – we looked for a common tie to make this violence easier to understand. Of course the common thread among these terror groups was their devotion to a radical interpretation of Islam, and, as a result, Americans began to see Islam not as a religion of peace as President Bush and other politicians told us, but as a religion of terror.

"This brings us to 2010. Americans' increasing suspicion of Islam as a promoter of violence has divided the country on what should be its most united moment. Islam, and those who practice the religion, is being marginalized not by our laws, but by our culture. A majority of the country – 61 percent according to a recent Time poll – is opposed to the proposed Islamic cultural center in Lower Manhattan. A majority of the country, however, knows the issue only as the "mosque at Ground Zero," a distortion of the facts considering that the proposed site is neither a mosque nor exactly located at Ground Zero.

"A fear of Islam has even affected American politics. As President Obama's popularity has dipped, the number of Americans who incorrectly believe he is a Muslim has grown. In January 2009, when President Obama assumed office, his approval rating stood at 65 percent, and just 11 percent of the country thought he was a Muslim. Today, President Obama's job approval rating hovers at 45 percent, while the number of Americans who believe he is a Muslim has climbed to 24 percent. With the dissatisfaction over the proposed Islamic cultural centers in Lower Manhattan and Murfreesboro, and the growing number of Americans who incorrectly believe their President is a Muslim, it is clear Americans are letting a growing fear of Islam – driven by a real anxiety over a lack of tangible success in Iraq and Afghanistan – get to them.

"Americans were once united in their reaction to 9/11, but are now divided over how to respond. With America ending its combat mission in Iraq and its apparent steadfast commitment to

withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in 2011, it is clear that the American military is not the panacea that we are desperately seeking in our battle against radical Islamic terror. Instead, a greater sense of national cohesion is needed to beat back the will of our enemy. On this anniversary of 9/11, it is time for America to reach backward and recall the spirit of unity that was so pronounced on September 12 and move beyond our growing fears.”

Congressman Alcee L. Hastings is Vice Chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, a senior member of the House Rules Committee, and Co-Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

###